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## **College of the Desert Celebrates Largest Nursing Graduating Class in Program History**

**PALM DESERT, Calif. (May 22, 2026)** -- College of the Desert celebrated the largest graduating class in the history of its nursing program this spring, recognizing 91 registered nursing graduates preparing to enter the healthcare workforce across the Coachella Valley and beyond.

Friends, families, faculty members, donors, and healthcare partners filled the venue with cheers and applause as graduates marked the completion of one of the College's most rigorous and impactful academic programs. The milestone reflects both growing student demand for nursing education and the success of an unprecedented regional partnership designed to address the Coachella Valley's urgent healthcare workforce shortage.

"This historic graduating class represents the power of partnership, community investment, and student determination," said Val Martinez Garcia, Superintendent/President. "These graduates are stepping into one of the most essential professions in our society at a time when healthcare systems across the nation urgently need skilled and compassionate nurses. Many of these students are first-generation college graduates who will now go on to transform lives, strengthen local hospitals and clinics, and help meet the healthcare needs of the Coachella Valley for years to come."

The dramatic expansion of College of the Desert's nursing program was made possible through a multimillion-dollar investment led by healthcare industry partners working through OneFuture Coachella Valley and its Healthcare Workforce Leadership Roundtable. The coalition includes regional healthcare leaders such as Desert Care Network, Eisenhower Health, Desert Healthcare District & Foundation, and Inland Empire Health Plan.

Together, the industry-led coalition committed approximately \$2.9 million to expand College of the Desert's Registered Nursing program, helping double the size of the 2024–25 nursing cohort and paving the way for continued enrollment growth through 2026 and beyond.

The investment funded expanded laboratory space, additional faculty and staff support, scholarships, and wraparound student services including housing, transportation, and food assistance — barriers that often prevent students from completing nursing programs.

"We already had the applicants and the demand," said Sarah Fry, Acting Dean of Mathematics and Science at College of the Desert. "What we lacked were the resources and space to accommodate more qualified students. This partnership changed that. It allowed us to transform demand into opportunity and significantly expand the pipeline of local nurses entering the profession."

Regional healthcare leaders say the investment was necessary to confront a growing workforce shortage. According to workforce estimates cited by the Healthcare Workforce Leadership Roundtable, the Coachella Valley needs approximately 350 new nurses annually to replenish the local talent pipeline.

For many students, the ceremony marked the culmination of deeply personal journeys shaped by resilience, sacrifice, and purpose.

Graduate Mary Lou Hernandez, one of the students who benefited from grants provided through the Healthcare Industry Roundtable partners, said her path to nursing was inspired by her own experiences as a patient. Born with a congenital heart defect, Hernandez spent much of her childhood in hospitals and was deeply impacted by the nurses who cared for her.

"The nurses who cared for me always took the time to explain things and make me feel safe," Hernandez said. "Now I look forward to being able to provide that same sense of safety and concern to my future patients."

Hernandez completed clinical rotations at Desert Regional Medical Center and Eisenhower Medical Center and described the experience as life changing.

"This has been such a blessing. I feel honored," she said. "It's been a long journey. My children already went to college and I never thought this day would come for me."

Graduate Kenan Arapovic, also a member of the expanded cohort, who immigrated from Bosnia and grew up in the Coachella Valley, said his passion for nursing grew while helping care for his mother after she developed multiple sclerosis.

He credits that experience with showing him how important nurses are to patients and families. "It's incredibly meaningful to now be entering a profession where I can help people during some of the hardest moments of their lives."

During the pinning ceremony, graduates participated in the longstanding nursing tradition dating back to the late 1800s. Faculty members pinned each graduate with the College's nursing insignia before the class recited the Nightingale Pledge, affirming their commitment to ethical and compassionate patient care.

"Watching our students reach this moment alongside their loved ones is incredibly special," Fry said. "Our faculty invest so much into preparing these graduates, and seeing them cross the stage ready to care for patients and serve their communities is a proud moment for all of us."

College leaders say the continued expansion of the nursing program aligns directly with the institution's Vision 2030 priorities focused on access, workforce development, and regional economic mobility. The College recently expanded its "pledge for All" initiative to increase tuition-free educational opportunities for Coachella Valley residents pursuing college and career training.

For more than five decades, College of the Desert has trained thousands of nurses and allied health professionals serving hospitals, clinics, and healthcare organizations throughout the region. With the largest graduating class now entering

the workforce, college officials say the impact will be felt across the entire Coachella Valley healthcare system for years to come.

For more information about the COD Nursing Program, visit <https://www.collegeofthedesert.edu/students/acad-prog/health-sciences/nursing/default.php> or contact Dr. Neil Lingle, [nlingle@collegeofthedesert.edu](mailto:nlingle@collegeofthedesert.edu), 760.219.4808.

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### **About College of the Desert**

College of the Desert serves more than 20,000 students across five campuses in Palm Desert, Indio, Mecca/Thermal, Desert Hot Springs, and Palm Springs. Founded in 1958 and opened in 1962, College of the Desert is governed by the Desert Community College District Board of Trustees. Through the pLEDGE program, the college offers eligible students two years of tuition-free education, removing financial barriers and expanding access to higher education in the community. College of the Desert provides the Coachella Valley with affordable degrees, certificates, and transfer pathways, offering in-demand programs that prepare workforce leaders and strengthen the local economy.